

Intimate Cartographies. A Journey with Tomás Eloy Martínez. (A SELECTION)

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Introduction

*Without translation I would be limited
To the borders of my own country.
The Translator is my most important
ally.
He introduces me to the world.*
Italo Calvino,

The study of Literary Translation

In a world where there is no common language, translation becomes the fundamental role into exchanging views and information between languages and most importantly between people. “The Translation process is an artistic communication between the author, the translator and the reader and the words used by the translator constitutes the major part in the process of communicating ideas or feelings of the author”¹.

There have been many theories on the work of translating; the history of translation dates back years before we truly studied the capability of the mind. One theory, which connects deeply to my process of translation, is offered by Jacobson. His translation categories make a distinction amongst the different ways of translating, interpreting, and signing.

Before I began my project, I needed to decide what the best theory to apply to my work was. The most important part of translating was to remain true to the source of the message even though I was conveying the message in a different form. My work began very much as

¹ "The Process of Literary Translation." UK Essays.com. 11 2018. All Answers Ltd. 03 2019 <<https://www.ukessays.com/essays/linguistics/process-literary-translation-9151.php?vref=1>>.

“free translation” as the translator’s responsibility was important, and I needed to refrain from word- to- word translation. As Schleiermacher states “to interpret based not on absolute truth but on the individual’s inner feeling and understanding”. (103)

Why did I begin this journey?

I remember when Dr.Zuffi first mentioned *Cartographies* to me I was working on an editorial project under her direction as an independent study during the spring semester of 2018. She was debating whether to publish the book or not. With encouragement from many people, she finally took the leap and sent her manuscript to a publishing agency in Argentina. I was an instant fan of her work and was very excited to work on this project. Before finishing the semester, she proposed to me to do a translation of the manuscript. Of course, I agreed without question; for me it was an honor to be able to work with one of her writing pieces. In 2018, I began reading *Purgatory* by Tomas Eloy Martinez in order to prepare for the project. Before I began reading *Cartographies*, I was already hooked!

The struggles and process of translating

One of the questions I pondered with before I started in this project was where I should begin and how my translation would do justice to the original work of two different authors: Tomas E. Martinez, and my professor, Griselda Zuffi.

To first comprehend the works of Tomas E. Martinez. I researched further on the author himself. Tomás Eloy Martínez was born in Argentina in 1934. During the military dictatorship (1976-1983), he lived in exile in Venezuela where he wrote his first three books, all of which were published in Argentina in democracy after 1983. Martínez spent eight years in exile in

Venezuela having been threatened by right-wing death squads of the last year of Peron's regime.

In addition to his literary and journalistic accomplishments, Tomás Eloy Martínez was a passionate advocate on behalf of victims of human rights abuses, and he enjoyed an active academic career, lecturing extensively throughout the Americas and Europe. He was a professor (1984–1987) at the University of Maryland and from 1995 was a distinguished professor and writer in residence at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J., where he directed its Latin American studies program. He was a recipient of the Woodrow Wilson Scholar Program and was awarded a Guggenheim in 1991.

While Dr. Zuffi was completing her doctorate at the University of Pittsburgh, Martinez and Zuffi established a working relation given her research interest which resulted in her first book: *Too Real. The Excesses of History in Martinez' narratives* (2007). It was the reception this book had in the Argentine literary field, that Martinez invited Dr Zuffi to write a second book, this time without the constraints of academia.

I never imagined that throughout my experience in translating Dr. Zuffi's work I would discover a hidden talent in myself. Literary translation is a far more creative art than many other writings. My goal was not to create something new, but to remain grounded to the original voice. I had a major responsibility to continue this project creatively but aware the task ahead was challenging in order to genuinely portray both Martinez and Zuffi's narrative voices. The most fascinating discovery in this process of translating was to encounter my own voice, and to connect with a creative force that otherwise I would not have found. As the well known translator Ken Lui states, "Every act of communication is a miracle of translation", I came upon

various difficulties in translating. I found myself consulting multiple online and print dictionaries, googling countless pictures of locations in Argentina in order to familiarize myself with the places mentioned in *Cartographies*. When Dr.Zuffi had sent me her digital manuscript, I ended up printing it out in order to highlight relevant places and expressions that I didn't even know existed in the Spanish dictionary. I had entered an unfamiliar territory which required a lot of preparation, countless hours of reading, highlighting, and reflecting upon language. Apart from becoming more aware of the historical background of the 70s, I constantly had to come to grips with the language, the particular “porteño” (Buenos Aires) language used in Tomás Eloy Martínez novels and Dr. Zuffi's *Cartographies*. To highlight one of the linguistic struggles:

“Me tocó el día cuando le anuncié a mi madre que finalmente había encontrado el sentido profundo de mi vida. “Mamá, me voy con los Hare Krishna”. Tenía la convicción de que para hacer cambios radicales había que abandonar los aros de perla y las faldas plisadas. Había venido de mi circuito de costumbre por la feria artesanal de Plaza Francia cuando me encontré con hombres y mujeres vestidos de túnica naranja que hablaban en tono soñoliento del amor y de lo terrible que era el materialismo del hombre. Arrojé los Particulares 30 sin filtro con la convicción de una creyente y recogí entusiasmada las florcitas silvestres. Mi cambio radical se enfrentaría pronto al remolino que me recibía en el living de casa en una túnica maxi larga de color fucsia con incrustaciones plateadas en el cierre relámpago”

“The day arrived that I could finally tell my mother that I had found the profound meaning of my life. “Mom, I am leaving with the Hare Krishna”. I had the conviction that to have radical changes I had to abandon the pearl earrings and pleated skirts. I was

coming back from my routine trip to the artisan fair at the French Plaza when I encountered a woman and man dressed in orange tunics that spiked a lovely tone about love and how terrible a materialistic man could be. I threw my box of Particulars 30 cigarettes without filter with the conviction of a believer as I picked wildflowers with enthusiasm. My radical change will be challenged soon by the tornado that was waiting for me in my living room in a fuchsia maxi tunic with silver incrustations on the zipper".

Mistaking Particulars for "Sun glasses" and later finding out that it was a type of cigarette, I couldn't help but laugh at my strange connection. Dr. Zuffi's tone was humorous just like her personality. I felt drawn to the text and connected to it in a personal level.

In order to truly connect with *Cartographies*, I first had to read all Tómas Eloy Martínez' novels, essays and testimonies both in English and Spanish.

I also carried out numerous archival works in the library to better understand the historical events mentioned in his novels and in *Cartographies*. Overall, it was important for me to be an informed translator, and I was fortunate to be able to work a la par with one of the authors.

The turbulent political events throughout Argentine history, particularly, the dictatorship, the "disappeared", the exile, thousands of deaths and tortured civilians, and the complex struggle for Argentina's cultural identity were at the center of my readings.

The history of Argentina is being told through Tomás Eloy Martínez novels whether the story was told through different fictional characters or real-life historical figures. He sought to create a technique which was the reverse of the New Journalism writers had developed in the

US. Whereas they wrote about real events using fictional style, he used a factual, journalistic style to tell stories which were largely fictional, based on real and made-up characters, thereby "introducing elements of doubt into history," as he put it. Tomas Eloy Martinez said in an interview done by Pam Am CBC News in 2004 "The truth is in question. The truth is always unreachable in Argentina" (09:24).

I began to walk the rocky road to comprehend these historical events through the authors' experiences. I had to understand their perceptions, intuitions, to get the thrust of their work. A difficult task was at stake because Cartographies is a delta of writings, combining stories, novels, chronicles, testimonies by Martinez and Zuffi's own stories. While both authors had similar writing styles, there were also many differences. I wanted to be able to portray Tomas Eloy Martinez serious tone and Dr. Zuffi more comical tone. Tomas Eloy Martinez was part of the history he was narrating through his novels. His personal experiences a very much imprinted in his novels. His experience of the exile that is narrated in *Purgatory* and *The Master's Hands*.

What I learned from this process?

I learned from this process that literary translation undergoes many stages. A translator requires to be an educated reader, a wonderer of the world, and an open-minded spirit. Every translation is an interpretative act, as well as a creative one. Translators read the original piece and try to figure out how to polish the language without losing the meaning. They are constantly making choices about which elements of a text to preserve and foreground and which to sacrifice.

My experience as a translator working closely with the author helped me connect with the insight of the author and really understand the text I was translating. We made unified decisions, we worked on countless hours of editing and continually communicated through email, text, or phone calls. I was able to bring to life *Intimate Cartographies* to an English reading audience. The experience of working with Dr. Zuffi really shaped the process and the outcome of the work. In *Intimate Cartographies*, Dr. Zuffi mentions: “In novels writers leave their most unconscious impulses and desires and they can transform into other beings. The readers can do so too (39)”. In literary translation the translator leaves behind not their unconscious impulses, but the authors impulses and desires for other to be able to connect to that journey. We become the rope that connects two worlds that wouldn’t have been possible if it were not for translation.

Throughout my experience to become that educated reader, a wonderer and an open-minded spirit I was introduced to an unknown world. Never in my years was I ever aware of the situations Argentina had gone through. Those countless hours of research constant historical connections brought to light how historical events can impact deeply a country and its citizens.

Today Argentina still lives in a state of limbo, putting together the pieces that have been slowly lost throughout the years and never truly able to forget. Martinez opens that door of his experiences narrated deeply in his writing and Zuffi connects those experiences with her own. In the last interview that Tomas Eloy Martinez had with Dr. Zuffi, which has not been published yet, Martinez says: “ Hago un duelo de muchas cosas. El duelo de mi exilio, el duelo de la pérdida del país, el duelo por los muertos en el país, por los desaparecidos, por lo que desapareció en la Argentina que conocí, lo que se perdió y no se puede recuperar.”

Translation: "I mourned a lot of things. I mourned exile. I mourned the loss of a country. I mourned the many deaths of a country. Those that are disappeared in the Argentina that I knew. What was lost and can't never be recovered". (Zuffi, "Interview").

This still holds true today in Argentina that continues to mourn. We live in a world where cruel acts remained unknown, but Argentina has remained vocal about their struggles unwilling to forget and still holding on to any last bit of what was once thought to be lost but could still be found. Since 1977, with the organization of mothers and later grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, also family members of the detained, children of the disappeared HIJOS (Children for Justice Against Forgetting and Silence). These directly affected groups have challenged the laws of amnesty. On April 8, 2019 one of the children of the disappeared recovered her identity with the help the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. Her father was searching for her for 42 years when his partner was abducted in 1977 and remains disappeared. Through the analysis of Martinez works and the translation of *Cartographies* as well as the readings of various testimonies of survivors that I have learned through my Latin American courses I realized that is quite unique Argentine collective memory to bring to the foreground the effects of repression. It has been five decades of continuous work on memory and literature plays a crucial role in allowing us to maintain this collective memory.

TRANSLATION. INTIMATE CARTOGRAPHIES. A JOURNEY WITH TOMAS E. MARTINEZ. (A
SELECTION)

Prologue

Purgatory

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Epilogue

*Books are not only a compass to signal
Our identity and diversity,
Essential to understand
The Other and the others.*

Tomas Eloy Martínez, “Poesía y relató: lazos de familia”

University of Alcalá Henares, April 10, 2008.

Prologue

In October of 2008, a few months before the release of Tomas Eloy Martinez' complete literary work, I received a telephone call from the very own Tomás. I was usually the one who would call to seek for advice, suggestions or would send an email. But this time the call and the request were his: *“Griyo: why don't you write a book about my novels that will be reader friendly. Your literary study, Too Real. The Excess of History in the Posttestimonial Narratives (1973-1995), does not cover my entire work and you could write without the academic straightjacket and with*

the freedom of your imagination "Your book does not cover my entire work and you could write without the corset of academia and in the liberty of your imagination". I said no, three times to be precise, with the excuse that I was already filling big shoes, was my own boss, and suffered from a total lack of imagination. Tomás, more obstinate than the entire generation of the Buendías, insisted. A few days later, I received an email with an attachment of "*Purgatory*," his latest novel, together with a letter of support for my sabbatical leave. I had given my approval as a partner in crime of a literary friendship that took a new turn. After closing my apartment and leaving my belongings in a storage unit in Frederick, Maryland, I traveled to Buenos Aires. I rented an apartment on Azcuénaga Street, with a beautiful view of the jacaranda flower, a few blocks from where Tomás lived. I didn't call him until October 16, though I had already written several emails to which he replied immediately as if I were his only reader. "*I want to read what you have written. I've been waiting for a long time*".

We arranged to meet on a Wednesday at five in the afternoon in his apartment. I took the printed version of the chapter on "*Purgatory*" and the prologue, the only chapters that I had written till then. He welcomed me with the excitement of a child, as if he were expecting a present, which I did give to him in our second encounter. A couple days separated each appointment from the other and diminished when his health began to deteriorate. Tomás was battling a brain tumor and had given up on another surgery. In that pitiful moment was when he proposed me to write a "reader friendly" book on his narratives.

The stories collected in this volume were written with Tomás' novels in my hands and with the eagerness to give them to the writer –still living. What I didn't know then was that in our future encounters the roles would reverse, and he would become my reader, commenting the chapters that I would give him at every meeting. I remembered when I gave him the first

forty pages of my work of *The Master's Hand*, one of his most poetic novels, he told me without joking: "*Griyo, your story got out of hand*". But it went "out of hand" when I continued writing. This book digs deep down into the reader, without restraints, illusions, and defiance. I knew after a time almost impossible to measure that I was writing against death and that there wouldn't be any story that would substitute life, his life. In the last chapter dedicated to *Death: a common place* our conversations are weaved into the text that took place a few months before his death and those that I had been collecting throughout the years in Highland Park, Pittsburg, Atlanta, and Buenos Aires. I let my imagination run freely and wrote a testimony, following closely Tomas's elegy dedicated to his close writer friends, especially Augusto Roa Bastos.

I do not know if in this journey I remained loyal to his work, but I did remain loyal to my memories of the writings we shared, first, with excitement, and later, with sadness.

This book highlights stories and illusionary truths in the extensive work of Tomas Eloy Martinez, recognized in Hispanic literature as one of the "classics". His fictional world pivots on historical figures of Argentina, but his imagination has crossed national borders and today without a doubt his work is universal.

Transfiguring the reality beyond its limits imposed by genres is his *modus operandi*. His narrative was constructed sometimes through ideological and historical figures; others through humor and desires of an entire community. Tomás—knowledgeable of Argentine history and skeptical of truths-narrates events that the reader accepts as factual : the attempt to transform Evita's embalmed corpse and into Isabel's dopey body (*The Perón Novel*), Perón's sinister secretary that instilled cosmic energy to the old Generals life (*Death: A common place*), the

time that doesn't leave any footprints in the life of a young cartographer that went missing in 1976 (*Purgatory*), Eva Peron's military custodians that went crazy because of her cadaver (*Santa Evita*) are just some of the traces of "fighting against reason" proper to a narrator that is irreverent to history.

The project of Argentina that the writer proposes is unimaginable, but the map that he draws does not go unseen. Adrian Gorelik, in *Miradas sobre Buenos Aires*, reminds us that maps are symbolic metaphors of the national body inscribed in the central events of a country. In Sarmiento the "problems" of Argentina come from the extended desert. In Ezequiel Martínez Estrada is Buenos Aires, "the head of viceroyalty" that has left the body of the country dead and bloodless. For Tomás Eloy Martínez, the problems of the country are multiple, and they do not have a geographical space, they are blurred and rumors expand rapidly, but at the same time they are materially shaped by domination and oppression.

Tomás E. Martínez constructed a work of fiction in order to map the nation by embracing its past. "Argentina was founded by its fictions", says in Borgesian voice. However, as he sets in his essays, novels and chronicles the foundational myths that projected the future of the country were embedded in the authoritative discourse since 1930. The terror that was imposed during the bloodiest dictatorship in the history of Argentina (1976-1983) left the country in ruins. Exile, a previous form of exclusion, permeates the "underground insile" in the twentieth century, with the forced disappearances and the migration of millions of citizens to new territories and distant languages, leaving behind families and friends in the mist of the most radical uncertainty.

Dictatorship in the life of a nation is an open wound, a shadow that cannot possibly be erased. In this book the traces left by state terrorism unfolds in two different timeframes: in the memory of my experience as an adolescent in the seventies and in a time postponed, when the experience with exiled and survivors of the clandestine camps became an object of study. In contrast with Tomás, who suffered state terrorism being exiled, I lived in the country in a state of adolescent limbo. I was able to capture certain experiences of history that in that moment were left unnoticed. The seventies, the exile, “the missing”, and the trauma present from the memory that is represented in Tomas Eloy Martinez’ literary map, are intertwined with experiences and imaginary characters.

Intimate Cartographies navigates an inner route, wandering through the imprints that the novels left in me and that culminated in my imagination. The texts have a confidential tone and follow the readings of the novels and not the date of publication of the book. Some essays remained closer to the truth of history, and others are seen in the fictional mirror where new characters appear paralleled and simultaneous to the text. The story of the Argentine author conjures up in my own imagination, creating a more explicit pact between reader and author; that is the link between the experience and the literature in the universe of a reader who takes on the pen, so to speak. Between literature and life, I choose the words pressed against a plane that do not correlate with a world and its events: the distances, the expectations, the departures, and the delayed trains.

The journey navigates a literary map that unfolds in different places but mainly in Argentina and in the United States. Tomás is exiled in 1975, because of the persecution of the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance, and adopts different cities as new destinations: Caracas,

Washington D.C., and Highland Park, and later returns to Argentina for extended periods of time until he finally settles in the country for good. Distance was a trigger to his greatest novels, like *The Perón Novel* and *Saint Evita*, written in a span of ten years.

In the poetic voice of the poet Juan Gelman exile is “when a cow can still give milk even if it is spoiled”. For Tomas is “the language of in-existence” in which his identity is lost forever. The time of the exile is revisited not only in his novels but also in his fictional work. I interweaved the stories that were narrated in first person with the other writers, some were survivors of the clandestine camps that lived through that period. The overlapping of these texts and experiences has allowed me more than once to overcome from the past silence, whether from family secrets, or through a system that prevailed through terror. I lived the seventies hearing “strange things” not understanding why I spoke Spanish like Donald Duck and read stories in the popular *Billiken* magazine. With pedagogical intent the grownups would explain to me that the Patagonia was the land coveted by the Jews, and that the Jews controlled all the media, and that the lefties took over the Perón and workers movement. I drifted in an ambiguous zone in the interstice between San Francisco, Boston, and Buenos Aires, in a language disconnected from its reference or without the density of things. I was able to connect the loose threads of my story through the literary world, and other experiences that gave me the possibility to understand an era lived during dictatorship. After having marked my small place in the world, I risk becoming a victim of public confessions which vary in responsibility, compliance, or victimization. Autobiography, within the literary genres, is a fertile ground to make sense of history, in this case a history postponed within a broader frame of post dictatorship.

When I returned to Buenos Aires in 1994, I met with Tomás for a third interview in his old apartment in San Telmo, Susana Rotker, his Jewish wife, was unsettled, she seemed disturbed for what had happened in July 18 of 1994. A bomb had exploded in the AMIA, the Jewish Archive on Pasteur Street, that very morning. I had arrived at the wrong time. In the streets I felt upheaved and restless. I felt paralyzed It had been a week since the Federal March against the political economy of the “Riojano” president, Carlos Saul Menem. I arrived at the cozy apartment in San Telmo in a state of confusion that reminded me of past times. How do you give space to a knowledge that has been dormant in a post-traumatic time, in the present of the Federal March in 1994 or in the footsteps in the Congress in 2001? *Shoes, wood, they took them, they are into something, raided, detention zone*, phrases that inhabited my world like rags, but would take shape only after a long time.

The seventies were almost like being in a state of absence. I lived in my city in a state of absence during my adolescence, due to my own resistance, or a duo existence and the ambivalent refuge that was my everyday life. Not being at any place or being in two places at the same time, in a doubtful space that shaped my existence. Through this journey, I was able to comprehend the past of my country, and my own past. I didn't have to leave the country in a lurch like many exiles. My parents were immigrants that departed according to their economic needs to San Francisco or Coronel Brandsen without any thought other than that of a better life, that is also a good reason.

A reader can identify with some characters wishing to be someone that he or she is not. It gives them a sense of power joining the heroines and heroes that against all odds achieve what they desire. That is not my case. When I identify myself with a character it is because they

reveal my limitations and stimulate a state of consciousness. In *Purgatory* I see in Emilia Dupuy, for example, a woman that cannot face her cruel father and a system of terror. Emilia is present in front of a multitude of spectators that do not know or do not want to know what was happening in the midst of the “Dirty War”—the world soccer championship of 78—even though she received papers full of names of missing people which she shredded to pieces and tossed in the air. That dark side of Emilia is what attracts me to her character, more than her unbreakable spirit in search of her husband. The degree of complicity of a society during the dictatorship that did not know or did not want to know, is a complicity that Emilia shares.

I continued in this literary map falling into unknown places, remaining on my feet through certain details that were imprinted in my memory. Sometimes the itinerary takes an uneasy path of disorientation and step backwards, other times it is a happy and successful encounter.

I insist: I am pinning a literary map that crosses limits determined by geographical and critical knowledge, and travel to uncertain place: myself. I was born in the Clinica Modelo of Lanús, in the province of Buenos Aires, in 1958. I have something in common with Cortázar, I was also born with forceps. When I was two years old, they took me to San Francisco, there I grew up with my parents and two brothers. We came back to Argentina when everyone else was leaving. I learned Spanish slowly and later left Argentina when everyone was coming back. I studied English in Argentina and Latin American studies in the United States. Language is a *shifter* that permits you to transfer from one language to another, or from one place to another. When you leave an origin, a territory and a language it inhabits an interspace or a hole of what was left behind. That is my place. But, like the cows that lay on the grasslands and don’t

cross to the other side, it is difficult for me to move. In that sense I am from “this end”, but because of circumstances of my life I crossed from north to south and from south to north, and at times took with me barbed wire fences.

There are some books that guide you to glance at something that one doesn't really want to see, as in those dreaded family secrets. *The Master's Hand*, Tomas' most autobiographical book, an implacable critique of social and individual repression, was my scariest journey, but also the most beloved. If I had to reveal a place where the author and I coincided, I would say that it was in the love of poetry and in the fear of the Absolutes, pathways that live in *The Master's Hand*, and caution even more my senses.

Many times, during my investigation in Argentina I was questioned, *Why Martinez?* I wanted to leave in these pages my reasons to the reader for why I chose his narratives. A journey of discovery is always an experience with an “Other”.

Purgatory (2008)

Washington D.C., March 2009

Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin

Dance me through the panic till I'm gathering safety in

Lift me like an olive branch and be my homeward dove

Dance me to the end of love

Dance me to the end of love

“Dance me to the end of love” Leonard Cohen

I rested the pages on my lap and crossed my arms. I was riding the bus from Washington to New York when I read the first pages of the manuscript of *Purgatory*, Tomas' last novel. Generally, on my trips on the bus there isn't anyone to talk to, which is a bliss, but this time I had to sit beside a young Serbian girl that wanted to chat. Recently, she had gotten a scholarship to study film in the University of New York and she was excited. I told her I was happy for her so as to avoid any further conversation, and resumed my reading:

Without knowing how she got there, Emilia finds herself naked, lying on the bed with him—he too is naked, hovering above her tremulous body. Everything happens exactly as she would have wanted. The lips of her vagina part, suddenly engorged and proud. Simon is erect. And it looks as though he has grown in the years he was away; he looks thinner too. He mounts her with the skill Emilia has only seen in her father's pure-bread stallions

as they desperately straddle the mare's back. She feels him deep within her, feels the constant pressure on her clitoris from his careful, measured rhythm (111).

I raised my gaze taken aback like someone who wakes up from an intense dream, when the Serbian girl asks me, what are you reading?" It is a novel from an Argentinian author. I am reading a passage that I would like to enjoy but I don't know, maybe you cannot enjoy what you have not experienced", I answered. I didn't want to start a topic of conversation, so I excused myself and set out to bring the manuscript closer to continue reading. We were passing through the endless New Jersey turnpike when I stopped in Emilia Dupuy's character and her first encounter with Simon Cardoso after thirty years. She is impatient to see him but at the same time she feels insecure about how he would see her after so many years. She was anxious to know if he still felt the same way, if he still desired to recover lost time. I don't know why Emilia Dupuy's character reminded me of Cecilia Cáceres, a twenty-two-year-old girl that lived south of Buenos Aires. We studied together in the University of Salvador around the year of 81. We used to call her Camila because of a story of a frustrated love with a tenure of the Opus Dei.

Camila had straight black hair parted in the middle and she would wear a handmade knit sweater earth color and maroon shoes with a ten-centimeter platform. She would carry with her maps where she would draw her dreams of her next destiny, because in any moment she would go to another country. In the map that she had traced by hand the possible destinations, all but America. That was the beginning of her departures. She was at General Roca's railroad heading to Mar del Plata the day that Ignacio, her impossible love, had abandoned her. Camila knew that he would never come back. She sat beside the window, eager for the train to depart, but with the anxiety of knowing that Ignacio was on the platform, waiting for her to descend. She

wanted to get off, to run to his arms, but she didn't do it. She imagined him with his firm stare, his soft smile, and with his raincoat that made him look like an engineer even though he was a folksy kind of guy, like a good Uruguayan. She knew that he was at the platform, that he couldn't leave without saying goodbye to her, like he had done a couple days before through a letter. Camila remained still savoring Ignacio's absence. She knew that if she would get off the train in that exact moment, her life would change forever. Ignacio remained on the platform waiting for a farewell hug. Camila traveled through that instance desperately while the train remained in a standstill on the platform. The certainty and the anxiety did not let her move and she rested her head on the window with hope that the train would pull out already. She felt the warmth of the embrace that they never gave each other. That was the day that she left even further away the happy city. Never will she see him again.

Despite the strict orders of not being alone with a woman, Ignacio would go see Camila almost daily with the excuse that he was going to see her brother. The chats between the two were given in a soft tone and respectfully. They would sit in a yogi position to discuss the nonexistent metaphysics and the antichrist while Ignacio would glimpse her face to flatter the virtue of the silence. Always so quiet, he would say as if Camila were an endless being that could wrap time. Camila enjoyed his presence as she enjoyed a good read, and she knew that Ignacio's words fueled her desire to be with him more than any kind of virtue. They would spend hours looking at each other accomplice of the same feeling that they would never name, because the important things remained locked in the heart with seven latches. When Ignacio got home, Camila would run through the hallway to open the door of the elevator and let him in. It was an instance of happiness. There wasn't need to say anything because both would fuel their passion

to know how to fall in love. They grew in an impossible secret love and later they parted because of various circumstances towards different directions.

After twenty years, Camila wanted to know if Ignacio was still waiting for her. She decided to begin her search in Montevideo, the last place that had been destined per order of her superiors. Through a family member that had contacts with a priest in Montevideo, she obtained his phone number and decided to call him. His mother answered, "No honey, Ignacio doesn't live here anymore. He got married". Camila asked for his number out of courtesy and planned to visit him whenever she got a chance, with the excuse of being a friend of many years. But she never made that call, nor did she travel to Uruguay. Ignacio had done the unthinkable: abandoned his vows of chastity. The news had left her still for a second time on the French style couch in her aunt's apartment in Recoleta.

Camila took the train and went to Mar del Plata for some time, determined to begin a new life, because that's what it is about, starting anew. But the winds against the rocks and the bravery of the ocean exhausted her quickly and she undertook another journey, this time to the north, a place that she couldn't adjust to even though she had tried many times. She received a letter from Ignacio two years after her arrival, but she did not respond. She wasn't thinking about the time lost nor to give rein to memory but to make a life. Ignacio's memory remained in the letter with the thick pencil strokes on the reverse side to squeeze coded messages in Ignacio's miniature and childish handwriting. She kept it in the box of the Virgin of Stuttgart, with other letters and pictures, to protect it from floods or hurricanes. She closed the box and entrusted to the virgin every single name that needed to be protected including hers, just in case.

Someone says goodbye with their head bend over on top of a glass to their love one that they won't be seeing again. Someone is with their back turned taking with them all the do not go waved with their hands in their pockets and the teardrops that no one sees. The farewells in exile are absent embraces, they are a bite of an interrupted meal while they walk at an uncertain step and the taste of what is left behind only an instant ago. The eyes set in the future of a soul sleeping in the corner of a time detained.

In the time of the exile the disperse pieces of your being will begin to connect. When you look out the window, what you see are not the *ramblas* of Barcelona or the Chapultepec Park or the rainbow shaved ice treats of Caracas. You see everything strained by its own sorrow by the pizza shops of Corrientes Street or by the violet sunset in the pampa, by the ridiculous songs that you learn in school and by the unbeatable taste of childhood. But more than anything through the history that of ... lost, through the endearing things that we can't get back. It is an unreal world that seems like fiction for more than one reason: because it is born, like fictions, from the discontent of reality and the necessity to construct "that other place" where everything lost will have a place².

In the essay "*In the state of exile*", Tomas explains the no-place of the exile, but it is in fiction where absence and loss take life. The melancholy for what was left behind is what distances from the world and the things, it is the rupture of time in a space that starts to superimpose with patches on each corner.

When I got off the bus, I greeted the Serbian girl with a sign of relief that we could stretch our legs and breathe the city air. With the pages of "Purgatory" that I still had left to read in my

² In *Requiem for a lost country. Requiem por un pais perdido* pg. 82.

hand, I walked on 34 and Broadway in search of my hotel that was relatively close. Just the next morning I resumed reading in my favorite place in the city, one of the hills in *Central Park* in the Upper West, where, with luck, I was able to hear the wandering music of a violin or saxophone. I took off my backpack and used it to lie down on the grass to resume reading.

I was in New York to give a lecture about *A Single, Numberless Death*, a testimonial novel written during exile, about the multiple losses that extended thirty years of life between one thing and another. But instead of preparing for my presentation I kept thinking of Simon Cardosa, the missing cartographer in *Purgatory*. I couldn't see Simón, I could only feel his absence. I wanted to see him, to imagine him, but I couldn't. I remember a passage from the novel about the exile that the narrator explained to Emilia the meaning of the visit to the Jewish museum in Berlin.

No one returns from the exile. What you abandoned, abandons you. South of the museum, in a separate space it rises (nothing rises, any verb is lacking: it rises? it opens? It extends?) What is known like the Garden of Migration and the Exile, forty-nine hollow concrete columns, whose heights begin inclining vision of an oblique life. Inside each column stands a tree, you can only see the desperation of the tall branches to reach the light, to meet the sky and to return to the sky that they once lost. The compassion moves you to walk around the columns so the trees will feel less lonely. You walk. The floor is made of round rocks also inclined, a boundary of the world for in which the things slide towards their downfall. You only give two steps when you are in no place, there are no columns, there are no trees, there is no sky, the compass that guided you has

disappeared, your reasoning has erased, you are nothing and you have stopped in a place where no one can come back. The exile³.

There are elements that describe Simón Cardosa: a young thirty-three-year-old man, he has a dark mole under his right-eye, he wears elephant leg pants, sideburns and long hair style of the time, however, it is a blurry image, neither young nor old nor wearing the clothes of the time. Neither a ghost nor spectrum. I can't figure Simon out. Could it be my impossibility to envision a missing person? Simon enter a state of permanence like the time that froze when you are left in a place in exile, like if time had never passed. I felt it even in the moments that Simon converses with Emilia Dupuy and recounts the intimate story of his lost love, the other Emilia that he never sees again. Of that Emilia, we know very little, could she have been among the "runaway" dead in Trelew? I don't know. Simon kept circling around me. Who supports Simon when he returns from the inferno of the memory of someone else that remembers him? Simon is only a memory of Emilia, which is why I cannot envision him. I could repeat the words of the narrator "As hard as I attempted, I would never see Simon because the only reason of Simon's being is that only you can see him".

How do you give real dimension to a "disappeared" that was assassinated? Perhaps no one had told Emilia Dupuy: "They murdered your husband in Tucuman just like they did mine. My husband died under torture. Yours got five bullets in his chest and one between his eyes to finish him off" (20). Emilia couldn't believe what she was hearing. It was too horrible, and she didn't have the evidence to bury her husband's body. She begins the mourning in the search

³ Testimonial-novel of Nora Strejilevich published by editorial cordobesa Alcion in 2006. First edition received "Letras de Oro" award and was published in the United States in 1997.

until reaching him. She goes behind the clues of his possible whereabouts, she let down the indication that they had seen him in a place one day and the next would be a different place and another one: Caracas, Mexico, Brazil. I was trying to give real dimension of her vision. How was Simon Cardosa's gaze? Does he have intense blue eyes that don't allow you to divert your gaze like the people that come back from concentration camps and feel the need to return with the souls of all the dead? Simon returns from hell to a monotonous town of retailers and country houses where Emilia lives, and seems to stand the monotonous and the absence of being loved thanks to the persuasive effect of the reading and illusion to see him again.

The exile is what you cannot see and cannot hear, I told Simon in a quiet conversation in which I enter from time to time:

No one can listen to your language, the space that you have been kick out is unrecoverable. Leaving is just another form of transfiguration, a fall into abyss. The one who leaves must break the inertia two times, and the second time – the time of return is endlessly heavier than the first time⁴

The wait for Simon's appearance is what gives shape to the sense of return, like when Simon searches desperately for the other Emilia in Rawson and in other cities. He walks through the Patagonian dessert with a photo in his pocket that he pulls out in every bar asking if they have seen her. We don't know what Emilia's fate was, what we do know is that Simon doesn't see her ever again. Had he left any of his belongings in the south? Had he buried his memories in some nook where they had a love story while he listened to a LP on the Wincofon on his way back to the city of Buenos Aires? His voice lulls affection for the only person that waits for it and knows

⁴ "El lenguaje de la inexistencia" *Requiem por un pais perdido* (93).

he is alive, the Emilia that he wasn't searching for, but he finds joy in making her happy. A sad reward? He walks in quietly, and sits down to listen to Emilia, but you can hardly hear him.

I heard one time from an exiled author in Sweden say that living in exile is like a fictional movie. "The image of the fallen snow from a black sky. I have never seen snow fall from a sky so black" she explained. The dictatorship marks a before and an after, a divided country between enemies and "subversives" and an unbreakable we that saves the martyr's memories of the homeland. The divisor line that does not form in the map, but the disposed bodies of that memory reappear. The exiles and the disappeared make themselves present like the remains recovered by the forensic anthropologist where the missing people of "Grupo de los Doce" lie in the Santa Cruz Church. There is a burial place and beside those bodies, 30,000. The author that explained her own exile observes herself in a place much more anonymous, the airport: "I remembered walking through those shiny, clean, perfumed hallways of the airports of Galeao and Kastrup, lifted up with my stilted boots and the idea that luxury clothing didn't mask the smell of incarceration; against any forecast, in those first steps of freedom I felt overwhelmed from a sensation of unreality and foolishness. Between that woman whose reflection passes fleetingly in the storefront windows of the *freeshop* and I, there was an impassable distance"⁵.

I enter the last pages of *Purgatory* in a cinematographic scene. I sit beside Emilia while she waits for Simon sitting on a bench close to the banks of Raritan River. I had read in several reports and commentaries that a novel is "a story of love between two cartographers" and that the author wanted to give "a happy ending". A love novel? A happy ending? Was Tomas able to

⁵"Dilemas of the exile". Presentation of Cristina Feijóo in Hood College, Maryland, November 2008.

mourn the country? Or did he want to believe what Borges had told him once: "when you are young you prefer the misery but when you are old you search for happiness"⁶. I wait with Emilia without any hope that her Simon will appear. The waiting disturbs me just like the distance and the detained trains. Emilia can't leave Simon. She resists to allow him to leave and she anchors in the bank of absence embracing the pain of the missing object, her lover. Emilia lives in her delusion.

Simon deep in conversation barely three feet from where she sat, and was exactly the same man as he had been thirty years ago, but not the same man as he had been thirty years ago, but not the man he had been ten minutes earlier, something in him was changing so quickly she did not have time to catch up. Dear God, could he be slipping away from her again, or was it her? Was she losing him? Don't leave me again Simon, *querido*. I won't leave your side. A person's true identity is his memories, she reassured herself. I remember all his yesterdays as though they were today, she said to herself, and everything he remembers about who I was is still a part of who he is. Remind him, draw him, don't lose him (8).

Emilia is indifferent of defeats, of death, or of obstacles because she doesn't accept the losses.

"Simon is waiting for me in a boat by the riverbank. We're going to sail upriver together. Who knows, maybe we'll run into Lieutenant Clay, sailing upriver to find Mary Ellis. We'll fire a harquebus in a salute to Mary Ellis. I've always loved happy endings."

⁶ Tomas Eloy Martinez, "Borges: El hombre donde los senderos se bifurcan", *Primera Plana*, Agosto 28, 1964.pgs. 30-32.

"The river is very low," I tell her. "A lot of boats have been running aground. If you lean out over the bridge, you can see them. You won't be able take a boat anywhere now, certainly not a sailboat. The river's narrow, it's barely a trickle." (270)

In the novels the writers leave their most unconscious impulses and desires and they can transform into other beings. The readers can too. I hear these characters and once again discover the horror that is revealed behind them. Tomas says that he reconstructs through his characters a life not lived during the dictatorship with an effort, "as big as the sadness that I feel for not being able to live that". The sadness will be the scenery after the horror. After the exile there are no time lapses, the pain deepens, the massacre of Huacra and Tucuman, Simon's desperation, Emilia's search and a society that turns their gazes the other way. That remains with us. *Purgatory* convokes the reader to see through two characters that separate and reunite by a fact that disrupts their whole life. Simon is a disappeared. That horror accompanies us, like Emilia, in the denial of the fact, and later in a battle that we still haven't finished, and that others never even begun.

The Master's Hands (1991)

Pittsburgh, 1994

*Like a bird on the wire
Like a drunk in a midnight choir
I have tried in my way to be free
Like a worm on a hook
Like a knight from some old-fashioned book
I have saved all my ribbons for thee
If I have been unkind
I hope that you can just let it go by
If I have been untrue
I hope you know it was never to you*

Leonard Cohen, 1969

I remember when I was a little girl one of my instances of happiness was to touch the leaves of a tree with the tips of my toes that seemed to fall from the sky while my head would tilt back on the swing. I would feel a sense of vertigo and a small pleasure in the tips of my toes in the air and my head tilted towards the sky. I don't really know how long it took for me to learn to sway the swing back and forth until I would reach the height that I wanted, but I learned, and I was happy. After many years and after some very embarrassing stumbles, I never felt like I was in the air, except in my dreams where I flew above crystal clear lake of orange petals feeling the joy of the breeze in the clear skies without horizons.

Now I am on the third floor of the Department of Hispanic Languages at the University of Pittsburgh, writing my thesis. I am in the best place possible: sitting beside the built-in heater in the wall facing the Heinz Chapel. Sitting curled up, I have on my lap *The Master's Hands*. It is winter in Pittsburgh, which is saying a whole lot. For months the firmament celestial sky with white clouds becomes a layer of steel, and the earth, sheets of gray ice where hands and feet

are supposed to function in unison in order not to fall like two herdsmen in the fog. Protected from the cold by the heater I hide from the people that would come in and out and from the freezing winds that I can see from the window. I look at the book and stop to glance the front cover of the edition of Planeta. It is a face of a women with a fifties hairstyle and a mask covering her eyes. I was intrigued. I was accustomed to seeing photos on the covers: Perón, dressed in military attire (*The Perón Novel*), Clarice Lea Place's casket carried by a group of young teenagers in San Miguel of Tucumán Streets (*La pasión según Trelew*). I opened the book and paused my reading as if it were the first line of a poem, “*To Mother, so that she won’t burn anymore of my writings*”. It begins with an act of defiance. I must get into it. In the first page there appears Carmona’s dream:

Soon after Mother’s death, Brepe was in a habit of hopping into Carmona’s dreams. She would observe the man with a firm stare while he was undressing and when he would shut off the lights. Brepe would arch her back and would raise up over his feet, ready to trap Carmona’s dream and pluck it before it even takes flight. But Carmona’s dreams weren’t about birds but about cats, rugged darkness of cats, cats’ tongues that would move in between splinters of black light (11).

The dream is surrounded in a scenery that looks like a remote place or in another time, heated air, yellow mountains, stalactite caves, and sulfur mosses, weightless cats thrown in the current of the edge of the river, the image of the ladies of the provincial aristocracy dressed in large organdy skirts, drinking tea. As I move ahead in my reading, I enter the mountains in a slow pace as if I were leaping into an abyss and my body would remain suspended in the air.

There is a deep ditch in the earth:

It was some sort of great Chinese wall, but concave below about hundred years before in order to stop the native Indian invasion. A battalion of sappers had drilled blindly through the desert, without knowing when they should finish. The lack of maps and the mortality had stopped the excavation at the entrance of the valley: that was the legend.

(20)

I remained curled up by the window of that impressive steel structure of 163 meters long, built by architect Charles Klauder in a gothic style of the twenties. From this corner of the glorious building, referred to with affection as the phallus of knowledge, I am immersed in an unknown territory, taken by the voice of a tormented figure: *Don't hit me, Mother, don't kill me.*

Carmona's voice wraps around me, but I can't seem to imagine the place. There is a desert, a ditch, and a place that I ignore. While I move forward with Carmona in his search of a paradise of no biological parents, *the joy of his paradise was being an orphan*, the postcards from the past with its aristocrats' provincial dames, its oligarchy of midwives, and the familiar world of Carmona, remained a legend of the past that begin to languish. Could it be a story of banishment from a place where happiness is unfathomable because the body is foreign to oneself? I devour the book in a couple of hours. I turn to the back cover, I usually read it after I finish a book, and it mentions something about the *bel canto* and the battle between Carmona against his mother. My knowledge of *bel canto* is a repetition in two voices of rock singer and poet Luis Alberto Spinetta; of battles, I don't recall having fought any.

Carmona is a character that inherits, like others in a way or another, a family, but in his family, he inherits a tyrant Mother, seven cats behind a crucifix, a death that he lives with from his memories, and with that unpleasant inheritance he tries to find a happy image that will

remind him of who he is. I am immediately hooked with the journey of the lost paradise in the stalactite caverns and sulfurous walls. I crossed the threshold and I let myself get carried away by Carmona's voice. The memory of his childhood, his departure from Tucumán, and what I imagine could be a metaphor for the exile of Argentina, a place in which the exiled body is gradually erased. Carmona's senses shut off and the only thing left are his memories of what he once had.

I cannot find a better representation of the exile than the image of a body that no longer belongs to you⁷. In "Luces de la Ciudad", a chaplinesque version of the exile in Caracas, Venezuela, Tomás remembers his first day as an unfamiliar place. "The exile is the certainty that you are out of place, without belonging and nothing belonging to you. That is how you start without knowing when or how it would end" (8). Carmona wants to reach paradise but from where should he put it together, from the setbacks of his childhood? An instance of happiness that weakens from the fate of a star? He is pivoting in a hollow state of his own conviction: in order to safeguard his voice, he must stay away from the tyrant voice of his mother and take the train to the desert in an early Sunday morning.

Could it be that our biological parents, our very sacred place, those who gave us life, are capable of hurting their own species, they are capable of plucking out to the last intimate dream of their son or daughter and announce to the four winds the human imperfections whether birthmarks, hairs on the palms of the hand or on the tips of the toes? They are capable. The cruelty delays Carmona's growth who struggles to hold on to his voice and his creativity and while we enter his intimate world and grow with him, there appears the rotten

⁷ "Luces en la ciudad". Personal Archive.

waters that are bigger than his dreams of a family. It is a desert that a long time ago turned into a ditch. Could it be the beginning of an Argentina made of exclusions and prejudices of breeds, races, and religions, even the total annihilation of the “Other”? I breathe in Carmona’s lungs and remember the journey on the train:

Carmona reclines his head on the window to retreat from the noise and from the voices of the midwives complaining of the pancreas pains. In that trip he meets a woman. Her name is Estrella, and it seems that the hatred and his battle softens in conversation. Given the free associations that we make unknowingly or without certainty the memory of the Tucumán pianist Miguel Ángel Estrella came into my mind. He had lost his sensitivity on his fingers when he was incarcerated in Uruguay in 1977 until 1980. In this clandestine camp he was given a piano without sound, and despite all the threats that they would cut off his hands with a saw while he was tied from his legs and blindfolded, Estrella reclaimed the pianist that he once was before he was captured. I kept thinking of Estrella, of the historian that accompanied Carmona on the train heading to the city when the locomotive detained the march and stopped at the desert. Estrella was a flash of light that predicts his future:

“They will not allow you to be happy. People like us do not allow you to be happy. I have never been happy, you know?

Carmona felt a familiar touch like a caress.

Never? If someone would have asked me what happiness is, I would have said: It is a woman that I met on the train”. (139)

For Carmona there are images that take place as if he were watching a movie in the desert. He doesn’t know where reality ends whether in that desert or on the train; he does not

know where the limit is. In one of the train's cart there is a piece of life. People converse about their sufferings, of the visionaries, of the cures, but Carmona's only thought is Estrella's story and the ditch that she observes.

He attempts to come to his senses, of who he was before boarding the train, but a part of his body is still twisted in the paradise of the ditch, in the infinite number of things that happened to him there that didn't take place.

The image of happiness is captured in that journey and in that moment, perhaps, with the loss of someone he loved, Carmona found himself in a labyrinth of streets in the city where he was losing his senses. The people at the plazas practice their labor in silence. Nothing will be like before. it is the melancholy of the departure without return. Carmona would have liked to have two voices, but he could hardly manage his leaving body. He had distant himself from Mother but not without the pertaining threat: "*No sooner you neglect them; the cats will kill you*" Nothing had the same meaning for Carmona. Nothing was like it was in his imagination.

II

Buenos Aires, October 2009

I was in the apartment that I had rented on Azcuénaga Street with view of the jacaranda flower when I resumed reading *The Master's hand*. Time had left behind an imprint and the characters seep again through a new reading. This time I shamelessly laugh at the cruelty Father and Mother had with Carmona, what before would give me infinite sadness that I would pour out in verses: I saw some birthmarks/ A ditch and your dreams/ I saw a cadaver cross through your heart/ in the country of the deceased black spots emerge from your body, they were wings and some irreverent hairs/ You never knew what were the symptoms even after

they had told you the story with specific details/ it remains for me to see you, in disguise, to see if we can make eye contact to scare away the Eye that disturbs us and shatters us to dust.

When I read in the early morning of springtime the cruelty of Father with Carmona under the jasmine aroma, my moods were different, and I felt a strange perversion:

Father was so enthusiastic with Carmona's progress in the water that he decided to cut from the core the twins' decency of their birthmarks and forced them to swim. He wouldn't risk throwing them in the swimming pool confident of their instincts, because he never really knew if they had them to begin with. He would leave them hours crying in their crib, to exercise their lungs, and when he would bathe them, he would hold down their heads in the water for three to four seconds. The twins learned how to hold their breath but never to swim. They hated the water. (39).

The humor and the cruelty took me on a journey with Carmona sinking the sounds and the forms of the letters in *The Master's Hands* like if they were cereal flakes diluted in milk, intertwining his childhood memories with my own. I wanted to be the annoying child that, bored of the commands, couldn't come up with anything better than pouring a recently served bowl of spaghetti on top of my head and start laughing. Only during childhood are we allowed to give free reign to fantasies, or from madness, which I could not admit to.

I imagined, with the limitations of being inhibited to play for different reasons that I was assembling a portable drama in three acts with a predictable ending. My public was minimal just in tune with my imagination. First act: Carmona's Mother appears with an umbrella and a bottom up shirt telling him, "Why don't you kill Carmona once and for all Father? What are you waiting for? (190) Second act: Woody Allen appears in the streets of Manhattan followed by

the voice of his mother that speaks from the heavens horrified because her son wants to marry a woman who is not Jewish. Third act: my mother's voice that, in a panic attack when she knew I would become a Hare Krishna, leaves me without word in the living room. What is the play called? "All mothers are the same".

In this passage I will commit a bold act and will narrate in first person the impressions that Carmona's world left in me, far away from the sugar mills. They are anecdotes, things that happened that have nothing to do with Carmona, detached from the narrative thread of Carmona, but echoing the ambiance of the oppressive Mother and her army of cats. Only for this time I will be a travel companion, or better said, he will be my Estrella.

I was happy, humming *unripe peach fell off the tree* when I got on the bus route 12 at Congress back to my house. I was coming from Silvia's house, at Rincón Street, where I practically had glued myself like a stamp. I had scored an individual seat at peak hours, Sagittarius luck, when I felt a discomfort on my right shoulder. I glanced sideways and I saw an atrophied thumb. The bus was full, and the passengers were crushed between each other like always during that time in the afternoon. I observed the thumb for a second time, and I felt a sense of sympathy for the man that looked tired and would rest his body on to my shoulder. I would scoot myself closer and closer to the window. Surely, his intent was to leave more room in the aisle. The atrophied thumb varied in size every time the driver would step rashly over the brakes. I supposed that the other passengers sitting and standing up would observe him with the same sympathy as me. When I told the story, I was told that "you are too whimsical", "that no one travels with an atrophied body member on a full bus at six in the afternoon".

Every time Father would exhibit the twin's birthmarks, Carmona feared that the same thing would happen to him. Sooner or later it would be my turn, he would say. Standing in front of Mother's dressing room, he would examine his body looking for any hidden imperfections. An atrophied finger on the belly button, let's see? Hair on his foot's sole? A tattoo of a letter on the back? The handmaids would confirm his fears: It will be your turn soon. And he would fall asleep thinking it was true: when he would wake up the day would have arrived. (41).

The day arrived that I could finally tell my mother that I had found the profound meaning of my life. "Mom, I am leaving with the Hare Krishna". I had the conviction that to have radical changes I had to abandon the pearl earrings and pleated skirts. I was coming back from my routine trip to the artisan fair at the French Plaza when I encountered women and men dressed in orange tunics that spiked a lovely tone about love and how terrible materialistic men could be. I threw my box of Particulars 30 cigarettes without filter with the conviction of a believer as I picked wildflowers with enthusiasm. My radical change will be challenged soon by the tornado that was waiting for me in my living room in a fuchsia maxi tunic with silver incrustations on the zipper. The wildflowers that I had picked up were dropped and stepped on by every step my mother would take in the double- entrance apartment. "Open your mouth, what did those wretched people feed you? Holding my chin with her hand, we entered my room and she teared down every single poster of my idols that with such stealth I managed to save in every move and I would hang them on the wall where they would protect me like guardian angels. I was more silent than Belinda, an unfamiliar character to me but my mother usually used her as an example of my silence. I never went to the reunion about meditation of

the human materialism that I had with the Hare Krishna. I bought another box of Particulars 30 cigarette without filter and with a glue stick put back together the scraps of the posters on my binders that I used for school.

Luckily the tornado didn't last very long, but just in case I looked for shelter with my father. "Viejo, I am leaving to Boston". Armed with a bag with three rags and my old man without saying one word took me to the Church of our Lady of Guadalupe. There sitting side by side we didn't say anything to each other. In that absolute silence I waited for a sign.

Carmona was two years old when he was thrown in the swimming pool so he could learn how to swim. How do you measure cruelty that supposedly comes with good intentions to help shape human nature? Carmona is thrown in like a fish without the scales brushing the water.

Soon after Mother gave birth to the twins with separate birth marks on their backs, shaded by bristle black brushes, like animal patches. Mother knew from the beginning that the twins didn't want to learn how to swim, in order not to show their bare backs, and decided that if Carmona could swim for the three of them, he would develop his lungs and voice muscles marvelously. She had read in a magazine that children swim by instinct, like the other mammals, and that the instincts become numb with the first light of intelligence. Carmona was about to turn two: there wasn't much time left. They took him to a cold swimming pool, at the bottom of the yellow mountains, and they threw him in without any regards. The water was rotten, with insect spots and stale suntan lotions. There wasn't anyone around. Neither Mother nor Father knew how to swim, this way Carmona would have drowned if it were not because of his instincts that remained

awake. He touched the bottom of the dense water and he didn't feel any cold: his attention was focused on the movement of the shadows, which became more frantic the closer he got below. Before he sunk in the slime, he pulled himself to the surface. He had learned to breathe not only with the air but with mere memory of the air. The pulmonary alveolus was swollen by the bees? that continued with their hustle without fretting of what was happening outside: the cold, the humidity, the water, the emptiness, nothing would upset them. Did Father know how long I was submerged? Around nine seconds, Mother told him with pride." It was more: at least double". (38-39)

I felt the hands of Father submerging Carmona in the water when it reminded me of a scene from Bulnes Street. I remember Rosalinda when her father submerges her in the bathtub, I don't know for how long to avoid listening to her screams as she tried to find a way to leave this world. I couldn't see her then, but I knew much later, that it was like that, after she told me: that he had dunk her in the water after her mother had cut a piece of her hair. I knew about this when she came back from the clinic with her hair dyed orange and yellow teeth weakened from the cigarettes and various psychiatric medications. The treatment to save her was "the Dream cure" it was a nightmare that started in an ambulance under the effect of hypnosis with Lithium, driven by two man, dressed in white, that believed they were *karate kids* in order to contain her. They took her on a stretcher to a shared room that I could only imagine because I never went to see her there. I wasn't allowed.

Rosalinda doesn't really remember what happened in that place, but she told me that she enjoyed the sweet macaroons that I would get for her and the *Confesiones by San Agustin* that her mother had brought to her. I would desperately run around the neighborhood looking

for her favorite food like it was the last wish of a death row inmate without asking her, do you like what I brought you? Rosalinda would cover her pain with her faith and makeup ready to begin her journey to Temperley to see her cousin when in an outburst she decided to jump out of a moving car. She looked like a movie star. She had cut her hair at Pino's hair studio and was wearing a maxi floral pattern dress with beige and purple ruffles. Despite the precarious scene, at the rickety Rambler, you couldn't deny that she kept even at her worst moment the elegance of her paternal grandmother. Holding on the door's handle and blaming the parents of *devils*, *devils*, she opens the door of the car with a gesture of farewell to a cruel world. The father, cautious with everything, was driving at a slow pace and now with more reason. He feared the worse, that Rosalinda's threat would become a real occurrence in Pavón Avenue, something that everyone would hate for different motives. Rosalinda would toss her head towards the wind and with her eyes looking at the dark sky, and half her body out of the window she moved further away from her inner hell and from the demons that would halt her so she wouldn't get off.

"The memory is arbitrary, and some memories tend to burst just because. Once they installed themselves in the imagination they do not want to move and the only way to get rid of them is to talk about them. Almost every story is born from a tormented memory", says Tomas in a moment of limit between life and death⁸. His moment was in the spring of 55 when during *colimba* military service he had to decide between following an order, pulling the trigger, or to stay true to himself. Tomas stayed true to himself. But Carmona is a fragile being and with a stronger front to be freed from, his battle was against the person who engendered him.

⁸ "Primavera del 55" in *Requiem for a lost country*, p.121.

What is bothering you, Carmona? Are you sick that you are losing your senses, your body, sex and travels far through the mountains and moons so your memories would become only yours and won't get tangled up with mine or Mothers'? Did you have to go so far scattering your being into pieces, a little of tact over here, a little bit of likeness over there, until all the senses are lost from a known caress? What do I do with your memories? Should I put them outside of the analysis and the psychoanalysis? I want to be a fish and glide in waters without the weight of a specific genres, the sex or the familiar spatial coordinates that orders us to locate ourselves in the map of the city or the bellybutton of a country. No traces are left in the water, which is why it is better to be a fish and to glide without swimming.

One day, I remember, a long time ago, I was sinking in the waters of Hyannis Cape Cod because I didn't know how to swim and Rosalinda, that saw that I was moving away, swam like Mark Spitz to save me. The peculiar thing was that while I was sinking and I could no longer hold my breath, I couldn't feel anything, not the death close by, not the desperation. I remained floating faced down without flopping my arms in the air like those who are sending a sign of distress so the lifeguard would dart from their chair while blowing their whistle. I simply was sinking while I saw in the water Ted Kennedy's escort drowning in the same place while he was swimming towards the coast. Had I lost even the sense of survival? I convinced myself of what once was sentenced was true: "You don't know how to swim because you like the water".

Pittsburg, January of 1995

The naked knows the cold and I was adding the naked bodies in the swimming pool and in the bathtub, sparing any psychoanalysis. "Knowledge hasn't been made to comprehend but to create cuts", a line I had read in a passage of *Microphysics of Power* in Foucault for a course

on subaltern reading that was dictated by John Beverley in the winter of 1995. I would scratch my head full of lice. No, that's not it. I would scratch my head because I wanted to imitate John. I had a crush on him: his devilish demeanor, the t shirt full of stains from the menu of the day and the spastic movements of his fingers on his tangled hair impossible to untwist or imitate. From my seat and in position diametrically opposed from the podium from which he spoke, his hands would move like that of an Orchestra director in a trance. What he would say and what he thought in that moment was more important than the voices of the prophets from David or Jose.

Beverley asked us to turn in a paper of our experiences as subalterns. It was easy. Even though I spoke English in the first world I felt I was a subaltern in a small ghetto of outcasts. I titled my work, "*Historia de una documentada en estado de deterioro*", and when he read it he told me with his choppy aspirated laugh, "it sounds like a *stand up*". I wrote in first person about the instances of power that I had lived in a visceral level: my family, the school, Videla, Martinez de Hoz, and national identity cards and an event that occurred with a friend at the bus stop 94 at Colegiales in 1977. I told Violeta Kas about that incident a couple of years later and she explained to me with clarity the reason why what happened to me had taken place. That it was only possible to get into a stranger's car without any resistance, because, she explained, you assumed that the person dressed as a civilian had authority to do so. "That is how the state of terror functions", she told me, and I kept thinking of what happened that day in 1977:

"Documents, please"

"Yes"

"This document is damaged. You will have to come with me"

I saw a red Fiat 125. A man dressed as a civilian without any credentials. We got into the car. I sat upfront and my friend Judith in the back.

“Do you know who I am? I could be a rapist. Do you get into anyone’s car?”

Inside the car, on the passenger seat, he shows me with a flashlight his identification. He could have shown me his Medicare ID I could care less. I didn’t see anything.

“You, do you know where you were at?”

“Yes, at the bus stop”

“Don’t act like you don’t know. We were looking for a subversive just like you at this hour at the same place”

I laughed while Judith would apologize for my behavior.

“My friend when she is nervous, she laughs”

“All the subversives are friendly like that, like you. We confuse them. If I let you out here here, I give the order to those guys that are over there, and they will knock you down with shots. Do you see them?”

I didn’t see anything. The “police” would ask us what we were doing at *that bus stop*, where were we heading to, he would say that the subversives had hideouts but he knew how to find them. We remained in the car driving around in circles I didn’t know for how long and in a moment, I thought that my laugh would disappear forever.

“You, Miss, you can get out, but she will have to come with me”

We were in-front of Judith’s house on Maure Street when my friend in an unforgettable act of courage answered:

"Until she gets off, I won't get off"

We were only 17 years old. We kept driving in circles around Colegiales Street in the "police car" until he left us at my house at Luis M. Campos and Dorrego.

"Next time, we know how to find you, and you, pointing at me with his finger and at my Identification card on the other hand, chew something else"

He gave me back my identification card, seven million seven hundred and eighty one thousand eight hundred and fifty-nine, that I had crewed around the corners because other than biting my nails I had the habit of chewing plastic edges.

Both of our legs were shaking for several days.

Resistances? None.

I was in the worst of my misfortunes; I would subdue to authorities without questioning from where their commands were coming from. You become like that, nobody. I thought about Carmona and his traveling companion, Estrella, in that instance that the image of happiness is possible, and it turned into smoke.

Carmona saw the yellow mountains in the distance. He floated towards them with an unfamiliar freedom, over the currents that were tinted in sulfur to get into stalactite scenery and crystal cities. When he was about to arrive at the caverns mouth, at the final point in the horizon, Mother grabbed him from his hair and dragged him to the edge.

Who gave you permission to go so far? she told him. You don't care about your parents? Stay here and don't be inconsiderate (190).

She tied around his neck a golden leash, she left him tied to a tree and went back to sipping tea with the aristocratic dames.

Epilogue

It is October 20, 2009. I have an appointment with Tomas at five in the afternoon. It has been two years since I last saw him. The man that greets me at the door walks slower than my memory, but I see him like when he greeted me for the first time at his small apartment in Highland Park in 1994. I entered the living room that stores his library. He offers a cup of tea and I accepted. I arrived at my appointment with the idea of just dropping off the last twenty pages that I had written about *Purgatory* and ask him a couple of questions, but it never crossed my mind that he was going to sit me down and *read me in that instant*. While I listened to his silence, I thought about his life, his experience as a witness of unmentionable events that he narrated from the beginning to not leave anything out. I run through his many travels, friends, and lovable figures of literature and the universal eclipses: the wars, the intolerance, the fundamentalism, the destruction of the “Other”. *This is something I am only going to tell you, and you alone* he comments in a tone of “gossip” and I turned off the recorder like he had asked me with the delight of being his only listener that there was a *Gay Pope*.

This man that loves empty spaces, what he has not seen yet, the music of Bach and Mozart, the sound of the rain, the gnostic gospels, the reflections of Italo Calvino and Gilles Deleuze, has left me his most intimate self in his books, his dreams that open up towards places that beat the desire of the other reality. I remembered the passages that radiated a blinding light that invite you to remain beside his characters full of life or to be one of those lives;

sometimes the sun darkens, and we disperse like lost lambs at a place where soon the shearing will begin that no one had imagined. I sip tea like if they had served me a glass of whiskey, one after another, even though I thought I wasn't thirsty. The silence of his reading embraces me, and I look at his forehead and his eyes that for the first time after seventy-five years needed to use glasses. *The tumor has affected my eye sight. I have lost the feeling of my left hand; my left leg is getting weak.* Tomas continues reading and for quick moments glances at me and comments something about my writing: *I am also bad mannered when someone interrupts my reading. You should give Camila a last name, it is more believable. You bring me closer to your readers if you write Tomas or Tomas Eloy.* I take note and I observe him with stillness and commotion while the recorder registers the silence that interrupts when he turns the page already read or when he comments another detail. *What I really like about this is being able to see that Purgatory unleashes personal experiences. The narration corresponds to something alive. It reminded you of someone you knew, of Camila.* That is the rhythm of our encounters, pausing between readings and conversations.

There are moments that I would like to interrupt and ask all the questions that I didn't have the courage to ask along all these years as if time could have remained still in that moment. But it didn't happen. The last letter that I sent him to Highland Park I wrote it by hand in a piece of rice paper from Nepal. It was the same day that I found out that he had desisted from another brain operation. It was March 2009 and I had recently finished reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez. *A Life* by critic and biographer, Gerald Martin, when I sat down to write the letter. The questions came out muddily: Did you ever write in one of the most miserable conditions? Did you ever go to a brothel? How was your father? Who are you intimate friends?

Did you read the letter of Oscar del Barco? Have you written a Peronist trilogy and military irregularities? Did you defeat your mother's voice? Were you loved? Did you lose control of your characters? etc. In a message through e-mail I received a response: "I never went to a brothel even though Gabriel Garcia Marquez thought it was unthinkable". The rest was left for our future meeting in Buenos Aires.

Could he compose his life through his writings, or would his writing leave that life? Could it be true what Borges said, "Every old book is enriched by a generation of readers"?

It is pouring in the city and the humidity is good for me these days. A couple of days after our first encounter a chronicle of his appears in *The Nation*, 31st of October, "Clarice, the dark sun of Brazil", a text about a Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector. I read the passage of *Live Water*: "I am not going to die; did you hear God? I do not have courage, are you listening? Don't kill me, are you listening? Because it is a disgrace to be born to die not knowing when or where. I am going to get happy; are you listening? Like a response, like an insult". It didn't surprise me that you had chosen Clarice to challenge death, you had done it so many times with the stories of necrophilia that navigated between humor and perversion. Splendid before the death of others and before the threat of his own that he saw for the first time in front of the London Grill Bar when you were kicked out by a gang of the AAA, the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance, with machine guns from a construction building. The threads from the dreams and death unite, to tighten for the first time in *Death a Common Place*, or perhaps, before in *The Passion according to Trelew*.

For my birthday, 26 of November, I decided to transform into a character from *The Queen's Flight*. The Queen Remis, haughty and confident of herself, asked you in an interview about your exile with no shame, "You cannot become hesitant even if it suits you". Grant me my wish. I began with some questions without following the pages that I had prepared that covered in my mind practically your whole life since 1975 because in exile there is no after. I adjust to some that I let go: What did you put in the suit case? With whom did you leave your literary work, your work material? How did you emotionally arrive to Ezeiza? How did your friendship begin with Walsh? How did the news of his death arrive to Caracas? What did you do with all the news of so many deaths? Why does Camps have you in the death row list? And among more questions I attempted to reconstruct a testimony of your exile, that was the idea, and I returned to *Purgatory*: "Do you think that in *Purgatory* you finally mourned your exile?", I asked you. And you answered in a paused poetic time with your voice held in one tone:

"I mourned a lot of things

I mourned exile

I mourned the loss of a country

I mourned the many deaths of a country

Those that are disappeared in the Argentina that I knew

What was lost

And can't never be recovered".

What was lost and can never be recovered I recited in the penumbra while I turn the pages of *Death a Common Place* with the desire that we coincide one more time in the same plane.

In a ceremony of intimate pleasure, the secret encounter with oneself. The reading, I think, doesn't have to be different from happiness.

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